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Guerrilla diplomacy in Nicaragua.

# PATH TO DISASTER?

THE UNITED STATES is risking disaster—another Bay of Pigs and possibly worse—by giving aid to rightist guerrillas bent on overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. There is a small chance that the Reagan Administration's policy will succeed in pressuring the Nicaraguans to stop conducting their "revolution without frontiers" in the rest of Central America, but it is much more likely that it will fail. The Administration is backing a guerrilla force comprised mainly of former members of dictator Anastasio Somoza's detested National Guard, rather than of proved democrats. The guerrilla operation may be too small to topple the Sandinista regime or to force it to change policies, but large enough to give it an excuse for snuffing out what little is left of liberty in Nicaragua, and perhaps launching "retaliatory" raids into Honduras and Costa Rica.

Meanwhile, the Administration has failed miserably to persuade the American people and Congress that its policy is sound and its cause just. Congress, for its part, does not want very much to be persuaded. Many younger members, especially, seem reflexively opposed to the use of American power anywhere, and there is a good chance they will succeed in denying the Administration funds to continue what it has started with Nicaragua. That will demoralize America's allies in the region, including both democrats and rightists, and will embolden Nicaragua and Cuba. The disaster would be of Bay of Pigs proportions if the American-backed guerrilla operations end in bloody defeat. There will be a much bigger disaster if revolutionary war engulfs the region and our friends lose. If there is an alternative to disaster and the blame-casting that surely would follow a Communist victory in Central America, it would seem to lie in a redesign of Administration policy and an urgent effort to win a national consensus for it.

To start with, the Administration does nothing at all for American credibility by refusing public confirmation of what the whole world knows: that the Central Intelligence Agency is providing arms, training, and intelligence support to the Honduran-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force (F.D.N.), which has between 2,000 and 5,000 fighters operating inside Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan government has accused the United States of waging war against it, and F.D.N. rebels are taking American reporters on raids with them. Yet Administration officials are barred from talking about what this country is doing. As a result, whatever charges are made by the Sandinistas and whatever claims are made by the rebels dominate public and world opinion.

The F.D.N. is far too small to overthrow the Nicaraguan regime, which has an army of 24,000 men equipped with Soviet tanks plus a civilian militia twice that large, but the rebels naturally see the Sandinistas' ouster as their goal. The Sandinistas are only too happy to have it thought that they are being threatened, the better to justify their arms build-up and domestic repression. However, since passage of the so-called Boland Amendment last December 21, it is against U.S. law to give aid to Nicaraguan rebels for the purpose of overthrowing the Sandinista regime.

Administration officials stoutly deny they are breaking that law, but their defense sounds as though it depends upon a shyster lawyer's technicality—the absence of intent to overthrow Nicaragua—and this further undermines U.S. credibility. The Boland Amendment originally was passed as a substitute for legislation drafted by Representative Thomas Harkin of Iowa forbidding U.S. assistance to Nicaraguan rebels for any purpose. Now Representative Michael Barnes of Maryland and other House doves are seizing upon the Administration's self-imposed inability fully to explain its activities to force through another fund cut-off resolution. Administration policy also is under attack from moderates such as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who feels that the C.I.A. has let the Nicaragua operation grow without adequate consultation with Congress's intelligence oversight committees.

IT'S A TRICKY BUSINESS, but since it seems impossible to keep covert operations of such magnitude secret, the Administration may as well acknowledge what it is doing and defend it publicly. It would help, too, if Administration policy were fully defensible—if the groups the United States is aiding were true democratic freedom fighters rather than ex-Somocistas. In fact, the C.I.A. reportedly has tried to weed out close and corrupt associates of Somoza, and it has been hampered by the fact that former National Guardsmen tend to be the only sizable group of anti-Sandinistas who know how to use guns. The Administration has tried to recruit members of the anti-Somoza Conservative Party into leadership positions of the rebel group, but so far it has failed to draw in the most credible of the anti-Sandinistas, including the legendary revolu-

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tionary Eden Pastora ("Commander Zero") and Alfonso Robelo, a businessman who was a member of the first post-Somoza revolutionary junta. The C.I.A. is helping one faction of Miskito Indian rebels, but another remains outside the F.D.N.

There are those in Congress and outside who genuinely believe that helping rebels and fomenting insurrection is a doomed policy. Among these is the Carter Administration's former Ambassador to Nicaragua, Lawrence Pezzullo, a tough ex-career diplomat who thinks the Reagan Administration should have kept negotiating lines and a flow of aid open to the Nicaraguans in hopes of maintaining influence and encouraging moderate elements to stay in the country. He thinks that the moderates might have forced the government to hold elections as promised in 1985, leading to an ouster of the Sandinistas. "We should've been patient," he told me, "and let the situation devolve."

The current policy, Pezzullo said, "is bush league, penny ante. There aren't enough resources to actually eliminate the regime, and Congress won't vote them. If Congress cuts off aid, the guerrillas will say the U.S. sold them out. If Congress lets the Administration go ahead, that could be even worse. The Sandinistas may go to Castro for help, and you could see the conflict enlarged. If Nicaragua decides to attack Honduras, what do we do then, send in U.S. troops?"

All the Administration can say in response to such challenges is that it hopes things won't work out the way Pezzullo fears. The Administration also claims that the United States did show patience and forbearance toward the Sandinistas and tried on several occasions—notably during an August 1981 trip by Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders—to negotiate a trade with the Sandinistas: they would stop aiding rebels in El Salvador and stop building up its military forces to threatening proportions, and the United States would stop helping anti-Sandinista rebels and would expand U.S.-Nicaraguan aid and trade. The Nicaraguans failed to take up the offer, continued fomenting revolution in the region, maintained their build-up, and progressively limited the freedom of the Nicaraguan people.

Some Administration officials say it takes "willful blindness" not to understand the Reagan case, but in fact it is widely misunderstood in Congress and the country—not the least because the Administration has sold its policy badly. An initial white paper documenting Soviet bloc aid to El Salvador rebels through Nicaragua and Cuba was ridiculed, so the Administration has practically quit trying to expose Nicaraguan complicity in spreading revolution. Except for Kirkpatrick, few Administration officials have made much effort to document growing Nicaraguan cooperation with and support for the Soviet Union. The Nicaraguans, meanwhile, have convinced much of America and the world that the onus for their antidemocratic and pro-Communist tilt belongs in the United States.

AS ADMINISTRATION officials explain it, "we have maximum and minimum goals now. The minimum goal is to provide the Nicaraguan government with a powerful incentive to enter negotiations that will lead to cessation of their destabilization of neighboring countries. Everything else has failed. We tried bribing them with economic assistance. We tried bilateral, multilateral, and regional negotiations. Now we are trying something else." The "something else," obviously, is paramilitary pressure. According to this official, the "maximum hope" of the Administration is not that the rebels will topple the Sandinistas directly, but that "pressure could produce splits in the junta" and demands from within for elections to resolve the differences. This official assumes that the hardline left would lose.

The Administration hopes most of all that guerrilla pressure will scare the Sandinistas into negotiations—such as those being promoted by Venezuela—resulting in a regional noninterference, nonaggression agreement. But at the moment there is real doubt whether Congress will let the Administration pursue its pressure policy.

Some Administration officials are in a mood to confront Congress. For example, Jeane Kirkpatrick, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., said that "the Nicaraguan question is of ultimate importance. It confronts us in the starkest kind of way with the question of whether we are prepared to resist determined efforts by Marxist-Leninists to conquer other countries by force. If we can't use American power in this case, which is so clear-cut, there is going to be a general assumption in the world that the United States can't use power anyplace. I believe we ought to confront the Congress on this basis—support us or take responsibility for a Communist victory in Central America."

The stakes in Central America probably are just as high as Kirkpatrick claims, but there ought to be a better way for the Administration to fight. It should develop a fully defensible policy and defend it forcefully in public. Unless the Administration can get the country behind it, it cannot win votes in Congress. And to win support in the country, the Administration needs to persuade people that it is promoting democracy in Central America. It can't do that by arming Somocistas.

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